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COMMUNITIES FIRST: ROMNEY EMPOWERS CITIES AND TOWNS

New program gives cities and towns unprecedented flexibility in road projects

Additional Contacts: **WEST CONCORD** – Governor Mitt Romney today unveiled a new initiative to give communities more flexibility and input in designing local road and bridge projects, helping preserve the character of cities and towns and cutting through bureaucratic red tape imposed by the state.

Romney said the new policy, *Communities First*, is one in a series of ideas the Administration will propose to give communities more control over their own finances.

He said, “My Administration is committed to providing local communities with the tools they need to manage their own budgets by removing bureaucratic red tape and costly state mandates whenever possible.”

Romney added, “Local residents are most familiar with the unique qualities that make their communities special. We will make every effort to empower them in the decisions that directly impact their everyday lives.”

Romney said the new policy will both modify state highway design guidelines and require collaboration with local leaders in the design process. At Romney’s direction, the state will:

- Review and revise the Massachusetts Highway Department’s Design Manual to incorporate the principles of *Communities First* by October 1, 2003. An Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from municipalities and regional planning councils will be formed to assist in this process.
- Appoint an Ombudsman in the Executive Office of Transportation and Construction to serve as a liaison to community concerns. The Ombudsman will help expedite the waiver process and ensure flexibility in the application review.

- Provide increased accommodation and consideration for design changes that provide for bicycle and pedestrian traffic.

Romney's Chief of Commonwealth Development, Doug Foy, highlighted Main Street in West Concord as a prime example of the need for *Communities First*. He noted that local officials had been planning a reconstruction project since 1997, but have not been able to proceed because of a disagreement with the state over road width and the possible elimination of trees along the corridor.

Foy said, "Times have changed. The Romney administration wants the taxpayers to take ownership of their cities and towns and be part of the decision making process."

In the past, the Massachusetts Highway Department has based its design criteria on rigid guidelines. If a community identified a design change that was counter to the guidelines, a waiver application had to be filed. The Highway Department reviewed the waivers and made a determination based on a number of elements, such as safety precautions and cost implications. Sometimes a waiver that was initially rejected was approved on its second or third submission, raising complaints about a lack of consistency, cooperation or a set of clearly defined review standards.

"Governor Romney envisions a government with as few bureaucratic impediments as possible and this is a giant step in that direction," said Transportation Secretary Daniel Grabauskas. "When it comes to the Massachusetts Highway Department, the people of Massachusetts are in the drivers' seat."

The *Communities First* initiative builds on the *Fix It First* policy unveiled by Romney earlier this month. *Fix It First* targets the state's resources to repairing existing roads and bridges before undertaking new highway projects.